

# HOW MANY BEAUTICIANS DOES IT TAKE TO CHANGE A LIGHTBULB?

BRITAIN'S MOST RAPIDLY GROWING JOBS ARE IN THE WRONG SECTORS



“ The recession is over, we are told. At the same time government ministers are showing a keen interest in engineering for the first time in years. The mantra that manufacturing could once again be the growth engine for the UK economy is being whispered...softly. So everything's going to be all right then? Not according to the UK's first National Strategic Skills Audit.

Over the last eight years the Audit reveals that Britain, rather than building the industries of the future, has been what David Turner in the Financial Times describes as 'navel gazing'. Apparently, the UK has been using its higher income to train armies of beauticians, town planners and psychologists – just the type of people we need to build a world-class manufacturing sector...!

We are surrounded by armies of conservation (what do they conserve?!), and environmental protection officers, and town planners, who are beloved of all the population. At the same time as we have more of these 'estimable' people that we can shake a stick at, skilled manufacturing and factory floor jobs have been walloped by off-shoring. What this all adds up to is that the UK's growth in highly skilled jobs has been one of the lowest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development since 2001. (Here we should also add that our investment in R&D holds a similar unenviable record).

What a surprise, eh!!! You only have to go out into the UK at large to get a feel for the present levels of skills we possess – a visit to your local supermarket when the automatic tills have failed (clueless!) is a basic but typical example. Yet we need an expensive audit to tell us that the UK economy is largely based on shopping, money lending and public employment.

The message seems to have been: "Why worry about the skills that are needed for tomorrow when you can borrow enough today?"

So who is to blame for this malignancy: our schools, colleges, employers, banks? Answer: all of them. Our education system is so rigidly structured as to turn children off to any sort of learning...test after test, after test. And then we have colleges hardly worthy of the name, which offer Engineering courses as a default to morons who should never be sent to college in the first place.

What ever happened to the Polytechnics, the seed-bed for so many good engineers? Why were they turned into 'universities', where the focus on technical subjects was subsumed under the general demand for more 'cultural' courses such as hairdressing and drama?

Next there's the banks. Yes, I know that they have been taken out of order, but why not, when they are still a central villain of the piece. Consider the following two scenarios for a flavour of what I am getting at here. Scenario one: an entrepreneur walks into a bank with a fabulous idea that will reduce global warming and produce at least 60 skilled jobs in the UK within 3-5 years. He makes his proposal to the blank-faced suits, for which he needs investment capital of say £3-5M; he then waits, and waits. Finally he gets a curt 'no thank you, we can't support this venture at the present time'.

Scenario two: a venture capitalist walks into the same bank asking for the same amount of investment capital. His proposal is to buy a highly skilled machine tool company in the UK. He outlines his plan, which is to sell off most of the assets within two years and then sell the shell of the company to the Chinese. The eyes of the blank-suits light up at this profit opportunity, and very soon another

prized UK asset is dismembered – along with all its skills.

Banks and financial institutions should do what economy and society want them to do: support enterprise, direct credit to where it is needed and be part of the system that generates investment and innovation. They should not be undermining innovation with their fetish for short term profit.

Last, but not least we have employers. Yes they suffer on the yoke that is the UK banks, but their track record is also nothing to shout about. As evidence of this, a survey of English employers, published recently by the Commission for Employment and Skills, found that more than 90% were aware of apprenticeships in the UK, but only 8% offered them, and typically 4% at any one time...and this is a total figure across industry and commerce – not for manufacturing alone!

So if manufacturers are not training people for the skilled jobs of today and the future, where exactly are the skills coming from? An easy answer: we are importing them. It's a far cheaper option for a manufacturer to import a ready-skilled employee than to train one. A recent report leaked to embarrass Gordon Brown, claimed that 98.5% of 1.67million jobs created by Labour since 1997 have been filled by immigrants. Now this % figure is no doubt exaggerated, but it does beg the question as to how many of these jobs were skilled, providing a short term band-aid for an economy that really requires a long term blood transfusion. ”

*Who knows; perhaps things will change for the better after the forthcoming election...but don't hold your breath.... 'Plus ça change'....*